

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I do like it, when on a Monday morning, I sit down to look at the readings for the sermon the next week and there seems to be a theme which jumps out and binds them all together. Doesn't always happen, but it did happen this week. On Monday, as I sat down, and I noticed straightaway something about the three readings that we just heard. In each of them, someone expresses a sense of unworthiness. Isaiah has a vision which leads him to say, "Woe is me, for I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips." Saint Paul writes in the epistle, "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." And in the gospels, Saint Peter, who is still at this very early stage in the story known as Simon, says to Jesus, "Go away from me Lord, for I am sinful man."

I reckon we all know something of this experience. The sense of unworthiness that the writers express here. We all have an inner judge. Many of us are harsh and unsympathetic to our clearly flawed selves.

Soon after arriving in California, after years of being subject to British dentistry, I had a deep sense of oral unworthiness. It happened at a wedding. It was a very American affair. There were ten bridesmaids, ten groomsmen, they all came up the aisle, one after the other and I was at the top. I noticed as they walked down the aisle, each one of them, all 22, had perfect white, shining, pearly teeth. We lined up for the photos after the service. I felt deeply uncomfortable and self-conscious. When the photographer asked us to smile, it was if someone had turned the lights on. I stood at the back desperately trying to smile without opening my mouth and baring my British gnashes.

My sense of unworthiness on that day came from comparing myself to others around me and that's always a dangerous business. Comparing ourselves to others always makes us feel inadequate. But we

all do it. We look around because we want to establish the pecking order. Who's above us, and just as important if not more important, who's below us. That's where, so often, we derive our sense of worth, our identity, our value.

But that's not quite what's going on here. None of the men in our readings, they have a sense of unworthiness but not because they've compared themselves to those around them. It was an encounter with the divine that in these cases made them feel unworthy.

Isaiah had this vivid vision of the angels crying, "Holy." Saint Paul met the risen Jesus in a dazzling, blinding light on the road to Emmaus. And Simon Peter suddenly recognizes in this story that his friend, Jesus, is Lord. Isaiah, Paul and Peter each encountered God in a way that was dramatic and overwhelming and in the face of that holiness, they felt unworthy. But the amazing thing is that at this very moment of unworthiness, that becomes for them the moment at which they discover their true worth. What they all learned, at this moment, was the important lesson that God doesn't love us because we're valuable, rather we're valuable because God loves us.

And what's true for Isaiah, Peter and Paul, is true for all of us. It's true, too, for those we think are below us in the pecking order. God doesn't love anyone because they're valuable, rather all people are valuable because God loves them. That's true for me, for you, the poorest person in Africa, those of our neighbors who are unsheltered, those who are displaced, the refugee, those for whom we violently disagree, they're all of value because God loves them.

Our worth isn't related to our achievements, our possessions, our status, our education. Our true value comes from the fact that we're created and loved by God. It's our relationship with Him that truly defines us. That's why trying to find our sense of worth elsewhere, by comparing ourselves to others, is always so unsatisfactory. We're looking in

the wrong place. If we want to find out what we're worth, or who we are, we need to begin by understanding our relationship with God. And notice it's as Isaiah, Peter and Paul feel most useless and unworthy, it's at that moment that not only are they beginning to discover their value, but they're given an important job to do.

Isaiah was sent to his people. Saint Paul was called to proclaim to the Gentiles the message of His resurrection and Saint Peter was sent out to be catching people, or to be fishers of men, as we used to say.

God met each of them with His grace. They didn't have to go off to seminary first. God met them where they were and used them for the task that was put before them, with all their imperfections and grace is another theme that runs through the three readings we have this morning.

Isaiah, Peter and Paul all learned that there was nothing they could do to earn God's favor. It comes as a gift. As we just said in that hymn, God loves us first. We only ever love as a response. Grace is God getting there first.

Isaiah was aware of his unclean lips but listen to what the angels said having taken a coal from the altar. "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed. Your sin is blotted out." It wasn't that Isaiah did something, that he behaved well or that he acted religiously. His sin was taken away without him having to do anything.

And Saint Paul knew very well not to boast in his own achievements. He sets out his message here. He says, "For I have handed on to you a first importance, what I in turn had received, that Christ died for our sins." His message wasn't a message of self-improvement. He didn't say work harder. Be good. He said, don't strive. We're saved by Christ Jesus and His sacrifice. As He says, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." I think that's the opposite of being a self-made man. By the grace of God, I am what I am.

And I want to close off by offering a reading of the gospel that we've just heard as a story of grace. In this story, Jesus is teaching the morning after Peter has spent a long, fruitless night on the lake fishing. After He's finished teaching, Jesus says to Simon Peter, "Go into the deep waters and let down your nets." And Simon Peter replies, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." And it worked.

The message of grace is this. Our worth, our value to God doesn't go up the harder we try, the better we behave. Peter worked all night and caught nothing. The secret of life is to stop striving. To listen to God's voice. To be obedient to Him. To receive God's grace. And it's as we do that, we'll discover our true worth. It's then that we'll grow into our true identity. It's then that we'll learn how much God loves us. It's then that we'll recognize the value of the Eucharist in which we're about to share and that this is a demonstration of how far God in Christ went to reveal His love to us. That's how much we're worth. That God, in Christ, was prepared to die for us.

Amen.